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ABSTRACT

Although there may not be a direct causal relationship between illiteracy and crime a look at the broader picture points to a significant connection. As many as 50 percent of adults in federal and state prisons cannot read or write at all; the majority of prisoners are poor; blacks, comprising only 12 percent of the general population, make up nearly half of the prison population; eventually, 95 percent of all those in prison return to society; and an estimated 70 percent will be back in prison within a year of release. Although many feel that basic skills training should be mandatory in correctional institutions, only the federal prison system requires it. Although academic and vocational programs exist in most state prisons, they have been unable to address more than a fraction of the need. States vary tremendously in the level of service provided, degree of participation in work and school activities, and provision of incentives and compensation. Major obstacles to correctional education are lack of money, inmate movement and turnover, lack of motivation, and insufficient recruitment and incentives. A national survey included in the National Institute of Corrections report identifies a number of exemplary prison programs. Local businesses and industry can participate through providing apprenticeships and volunteer tutors. (YLB)

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ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS · PLANNING · ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

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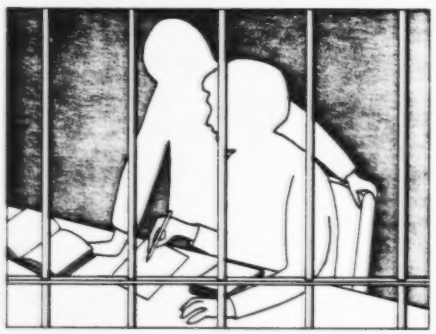
BEHIND BARS



The United States incarcerates proportionately more people than nearly any other country in the western world. Spread across the nation are 47 federal prisons, more than 6,500 state prisons, and 3,500 local jails–not to speak of hundreds of juvenile retention facilities. On any given day more than 700,000 men and women are behind bars in the adult institutions alone. Included among them are enormous numbers who are either totally illiterate or whose literacy level is so low that they cannot deal with the ordinary tasks of daily life. The cost of their incarceration hangs heavily on all of us: $15,000 a year for each inmate. With the added cost of law enforcement and prison construction, the annual bill is well over $10 billion–and it is growing larger.

State prison populations have grown explosively in recent years, more than doubling since 1969, and there are few signs of letup as public sentiment across the nation swings toward more severe and determinate sentencing policies.

Take California, for example, where "the growth has been staggering," according to Dennis Dunne, deputy director of the Department of Corrections. "We've gone from 21,000 inmates in 1976 to 57,000 this year and we expect it'll go to 90,000 in the next five years." The state presently ranks 27th in the country for the numbers of persons incarcerated per 100,000 population and has recently authorized a construction program to house 25,000 new prisoners at a cost of $2.2 billion. Actually, California crime has gone down in the past three years, but incarceration has gone up as legislators and judges get tougher. Still, many Californians think the system is not tough enough. Polls indicate that a $500 million bond issue for prison construction on the November ballot will sail through. The story is the same nearly everywhere, with severe overcrowding and officials hard-pressed to keep up with the deluge of new arrivals. According to the 1986 *Corrections Yearbook*, there are presently more than 140 building projects underway or in the planning stages to create an additional 115,000 prison beds at a cost to taxpayers in the billions.

No one would argue that there is a direct causal relationship between illiteracy and crime, but a look at the broader picture points to a hot connection:

(cont'd. on p. 4)

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BEHIND BARS

(cont'd. from p. 1)

• A soon-to-be-released study by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), the education division of the U.S. Department of Justice, reports that as many as 50 percent of adults in federal and state prisons cannot read or write at all. Nearly two-thirds have not completed high school. About one-fourth have not even completed elementary school.

• The majority of people in prisons are poor. The average unemployment rate for offenders prior to arrest is about 40 percent compared to the national average unemployment rate of about 7 percent (1980). Of those employed, more than two-thirds earned less than a poverty-level salary prior to arrest.

• Numerically, whites in the general U.S. population by far outnumber blacks and other minorities. But blacks, comprising only 12 percent of the general population, make up nearly half (47 percent) of the prison population. Other minorities in prison are similarly disproportionate to their numbers nationwide.

• The majority of inmates are male (96 percent). But among the 4 percent who are women, many are single mothers with two or more children, on welfare, and troubled by physical or mental ill health, drugs and/or alcohol dependence.

• Most inmates are young enough to have full lives ahead of them. In the state prisons, more than half are between 20 and 30 years old; almost one-third between 20-24.

• Eventually, 95 percent of all those in prison return to society. The average length of incarceration is 2-3 years. (But this is being extended with the growing "get tough" attitude that is leading to harsher, less flexible sentences. New federal guidelines, for example, call for convicts to serve the full term as sentenced with no time off for good behavior and no parole. At present, most federal prisoners are eligible for parole after serving one-third of their term.)

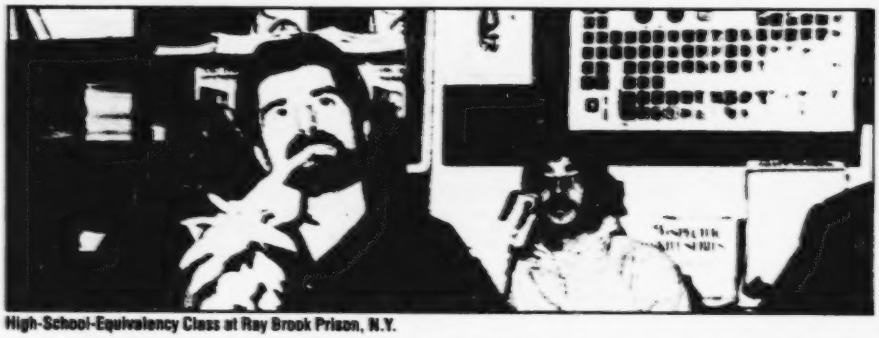
• Approximately 150,000 inmates are released each year, but a very high percentage–estimates range as high as 70 percent–will wind up back in prison within a year of their release.

Rehabilitation vs. Punishment

Social attitudes about the purposes of incarceration vary. Some believe that it is primarily for protection of the public, for deterrence, and punishment. Some believe that prison activity for rehabilitation is futile–or they see it as coddling when punishment should call for somber conditions. Others feel that being in prison is the punishment, and that rehabilitative treatment to change anti-social and criminal behavior is the *sine qua non* of a productive corrections system.

With the prison system bursting at the seams, however, these questions may be moot, or may at least need to be reframed. From a simple practical point of view, how long can we go on incarcerating more and more people? And in the end isn't the public better protected by educating and changing offenders so that they can emerge from prisons with the capacity to function as responsible members of society?

The response of some jurists, educators, members of Congress, and other concerned citizens in recent years has been to advocate legislation, policies, and funds for effective correctional educational programs. "We cannot afford to incarcerate the same people again and again without giving them the skills to function outside prison," former U.S. Secretary of Education Bell said in 1983 as he committed his department to the goals of correctional education. But various pieces of legislation to support these goals have failed to get through the Congress.



High-School-Equivalency Class at Ray Brook Prison, N.Y.

Elsewhere a search for solutions has led to new alternatives. Governor Gerald Baliles of Virginia recently announced a "no reading, no release" policy for all Virginia inmates. District Attorney Mario Merola, in New York City's Bronx County, concerned that the court system is a revolving door, has established a program in which defendants are tested and, based on the results, provided with tutoring in reading, writing, math, and speech, along with psychological counseling and vocational help. The program operates as an alternative to incarceration for defendants charged with less serious crimes whose cases are pending before the court. It marks the first time that a district attorney's office has taken an aggressive educational role.

Former Chief Justice Warren Burger, a leading spokesman for the concern about the costs and benefits of warehousing prisoners, has repeatedly recommended that "every inmate who cannot read, write, and do simple arithmetic be given that training, not as an option but as a mandatory requirement." Indeed, in the federal prison system, it is a requirement. Every inmate who reads below an 8th-grade level (recently raised from 6th grade) must have instruction in basic skills for at least 90 days. Other goals in federal education and training are that every inmate capable of doing so earn a high school diploma or its equivalent by the time of release, and that everyone without a work skill be given training to qualify for post-release work in a career-oriented occupation. The federal prison system is distinguished in many ways for its educational and administrative innovations–even to having artist-in-residence programs. But only a small portion of the total national inmate population is confined in federal prisons, less than 10 percent at present. In the state prisons, where the vast majority are, the picture is quite different.

State Prison Programs

While academic and vocational programs exist in most state prisons (few in jails), they have been unable to address more than a fraction of the need. As of 1983, the last year for which reliable figures could be found, fewer than 12 percent of the total prison population had access to basic and vocational education. On the average, less than a third of inmates were in educational programs of any kind. In general, the states were spending 5 percent of their total correctional budget on all inmate education–leaving a huge gap between the needs of inmates and the availability of programs. (Of the 5 percent typically spent by a state, about 1.5 percent comes directly from the state; the remainder comes from various federal agencies.)

In the absence of any federal policy-setting requirements, each state operates on its own. There is no coherency in overall philosophy, standards, or procedures. Some states require all inmates to work. Others offer a choice of work or school. Still others provide flexible schedules so that inmates can participate in both. Some states require neither work nor school attendance, with large numbers of inmates spending their time in idleness, a frequently-cited cause of riots and disturbances. The result is tremendous variation from state to state, and even among institutions within a state, in the level of service provided, degree of participation in work and school activities, and provision of incentives and compensation.

Governance patterns vary as well. In most cases the department of corrections has charge of education–sometimes contracting with ABE, community colleges, vocational-technical schools, voluntary programs, and community-based organizations to deliver services. In other cases the department of education is in charge. In 10 states, school districts have been established solely to serve correctional institutions, thereby assuring that they do not have to compete with other education programs for funding. Elsewhere, especially where juveniles are involved, joint responsibility may be shared by various departments including mental health and social services.

What it comes down to is that in a few state prisons education programs are highly developed, in most they are meager at best, and others range in between. In many instances, what is reported as "a program" may be no more than a workbook handed to a prisoner to use in his or her cell and an occasional meeting with an instructor.

The heart of the matter is that local philosophy shapes the program: "Is it intended as a means of maintaining order and control, an antidote to debasing idleness, a way to help reduce recidivism rates, or of seeing to some human needs a civilized society considers basic?," asks NIC's forthcoming report *Making Literacy Programs Work: A Practical Guide for Correctional Educators*. But even where there is conviction in the redemptive value of education, the impediments that stand in the way are mighty.

"Correctional education," as one observer puts it, "is often tolerated by the custodial staff, ignored by the treatment staff, apologized for by the education department, and underfunded by management."

Here are some of the major obstacles as reported to a Senate committee by John Nuttall, assistant director of education in New York State's Department of Correctional Services:

• Money. Spending money on prison programs is not popular. In many states penal education is not a priority, though there are now signs that this may be changing for the better. In the meantime, lack of suf-

ficient resources makes a full-fledged attack on the matter very difficult and perhaps impossible.

• Inmate Movement and Turnover. In addition to overcrowding, which probably has the greatest impact on attempts to provide consistent rational programming, there is constant movement of inmates from facility to facility. This grows from efforts to move inmates from rural, high-security facilities to lower-security facilities nearer their homes in urban areas as they progress through their terms. In New York, the average stay in any one place stands at 4 to 5 months. Most maximum-security facilities turn over their entire inmate population 2 to 3 times a year.

• Lack of Motivation. The constituents themselves are a major obstacle–alienated by a history of failure and frustration in a variety of school, family, and occupational settings. Lacking faith in the education system, it is difficult to recruit and retain them in literacy programs. "When an inmate looks at the options he has to occupy his time while incarcerated, education is often the least attractive," notes Nuttall. "If you work in the laundry you can be sure of clean, well-pressed clothes. If you work in the kitchen, you eat well. If you're in school, you often have to 'lock in' in a part of the prison where you don't want to be. And if you work in a prison industry, the pay is higher and it's more like the real world."

(In New York State, prisoners in education programs are paid, but at a lower rate than if they worked in a skilled maintenance job or a prison industry.) In education, an inmate can earn between 95¢ and $1.05 a day; in a skilled maintenance job, $1.45 to $1.55 per day; and in an industry job, up to $3.90 for a 6-hour day. For many inmates, especially those without other means or families to help them, the pay differential can be significant, making the difference between having enough to buy cigarettes or other small pleasures or not.)

• Recruitment and Incentives. The number of inmates who enroll in education often relates to the kind of efforts made to recruit them. Often the efforts are minimal because, prison officials say, program funds are minimal or nonexistent. Conversely, several places use a variety of incentives to attract and retain students. These are best epitomized in the federal system where education achievement is linked to higher-level and better-paying jobs in prison industries; eligibility for vocational training and special privileges such as time off for good behavior; small monetary awards for students who achieve a third-grade reading level ($10 or $15); and graduation ceremonies, sometimes in cap and gown, with diplomas awarded.

Literacy Graduates at Otisville Prison, N.Y.

The following letter from Mildred Kaplan, a volunteer at the New York State Bedford Hills Women's Prison, conveys the meaning and flavor of such recognition ceremonies:

"An air of excitement pervaded the gym where the graduation was to take place....The procession of graduates was about to begin. Dressed in blue caps and gowns, the women marched forward to the strains of Pomp and Circumstance played on the electric piano by one of the inmate musicians. We looked toward a sea of black, white, and hispanic faces, smiles flashing....The prison superintendent expressed her pleasure in what all the women had achieved for themselves under adverse circumstances. The high school valedictorian gave voice to the underlying theme for so many of the women. 'I didn't do well in school when I was young on the outside. It wasn't until I took a course here that I realized I had the ability to do well in school and so I continued.'

"The women's prison chorus had sung lustily in four-part harmony. The superintendent invited us all to join in the last three choruses. By the end, some of the audience had linked arms. I turned to look at the young woman behind me and saw her brushing away tears. At the recessional, the little girl who was with her cried out, 'There's my mommy.' As the women came through the line, we broke ranks, reaching toward, hugging the women we knew. There was Ginny who had failed her high school equivalency test twice but who persisted and ultimately succeeded. She was beaming. And there was T.J., who had six children by the time she was 22 and had to struggle long and hard with herself to feel that getting a degree could still matter to her."

Programs That Work

A national survey included in the (excellent) NIC report identifies a number of exemplary prison programs. Among them are Colorado's Buena Vista Correctional Facility, Kansas State Industrial Reformatory in Hutchinson, Lebanon Correctional Institution in Ohio, Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup, New York's Mt. McGregor Correctional Facility, Muskegon Correctional Facility in Michigan, Petersburg Federal Correctional Institute in Virginia, and the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, Washington.

"The best programs," the report states, "have teachers/tutors thoroughly trained in reading, with special programs targeted to inmates reading at the 0 to 3rd-4th grade level. Most programs have some kind of ABE offering that focuses on literacy although not always with specific programs for the poorest readers. A little over a tenth of the institutions...have no educational opportunities or only part-time tutoring for those inmates at the lowest literacy levels. About two-thirds of the programs have integrated their basic skills programs with vocational and/or life skills training, have an explicit and coherent philosophy, and report some kind of cooperative working relationship with prison administration and security staff. Almost all do some kind of assessment."

As for the outstanding areas of need: "Over half of the programs described do not have any programs for special education (handicapped) students or non- or limited-English speakers. Lack of a focus on transition to release and little or no link with outside businesses or the community occur in about 40 percent of the programs. Finally, there is indication of a need for staff development, especially in literacy training. At least 40 percent of the institutions did not report any kind of staff development program."

A Role for Business and Industry

Local businesses and industry can offer certain inmates individualized on-the-job training or trade/craft apprenticeships. They can provide volunteer tutors from among their own employees; speak to inmates about employment skills and career decision-making; and participate in job and training fairs, life skills and vocational education classes, special workshops, and the like.

(For information on how apprenticeship programs are set up and carried out, readers may want to refer to a set of policies developed by the Michigan Department of Corrections. For this material, contact Diane Spence, Director, Michigan Department of Corrections, 3222 South Logan, Lansing, Michigan 48913. A detailed guide on apprenticeship programs for women is also available from the U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau.)

In Sum

The cause of penal education continues to be an uphill climb but there is discernible forward movement. Seven states have adopted some form of mandatory basic education and in others the subject is under discussion. Since 1984, $4 million has been obligated through NIC for technical assistance and grants to state prisons. Looking to the benefits of technology, a considerable portion of these funds has been granted to study the state of computer-assisted instruction in prison settings, and to help educators acquire the know-how and means to establish or improve CAI programs. Still another effort is being mounted by South Carolina Educational Television to develop video instructional materials for incarcerated persons.

While these and similar activities are significant, they also are few and far between. The central issues remain to be tackled. "What we need most," says Stephen Steurer, executive director of the Correctional Education Association, "is a global piece of legislation that would help set the tone for national reform and provide a clear policy to guide program planning and standards at all levels. Money is urgently needed, too. Right now there is no legislation that provides funds strictly for correctional education. The states have to use bits and pieces out of any legislation they can find that in one way or another impinges on basic skills."

Moreover, "there is no central agency responsible for gathering information about corrections education, so that it is extremely difficult to get a handle on the whole picture. We've got to take a look at the programs that work and see how and what's being taught. What gains are being made beyond the simple achievement measures? What about the effect on self-worth? Does the development of literacy provide something meaningful for the inmate when he returns to society or is it a major building block on which other educational efforts need to be founded? And how does literacy fit into the continuum of education for the job and social skills needed to survive on the outside?"

Sylvia McCollum of the Federal Bureau of Prisons notes that: "In our system, we do a fairly good job of assisting the individual to get ready for a positive lifestyle on release. We spend thousands a year on that. But once the person leaves, everything can fall apart. There's no unemployment insurance, isolation from the mainstream, no support system. Agency services are fragmented and uncoordinated."

Steurer adds that: "It's not enough for decisions about the correctional and rehabilitative process to be made by security and other treatment staff–which is often the case. Correctional educators need to be much more closely involved in the decision-making."